

Schiller's 'Rütli Oath' and the Swiss nation

A great example of Schiller's work as an ecumenical thinker and world citizen is the play *William Tell*, which became the Swiss national drama. While the figure of Tell, who shot an apple off his son's head and became his country's liberator, is legendary, the subject of Schiller's play goes back to an actual event which occurred on Aug. 1, 1291. Switzerland is celebrating the 700th anniversary of that event this year, as the birthday of the nation.

Schiller—who never went to Switzerland—evoked the *Bundesbrief* of 1291, in which the leaders of three Forest Cantons, Unterwalden, Schwyz, and Uri, bordering Lake Lucerne in the heart of Switzerland, defied the oppressive foreign governors appointed to judge them by the Austrian Hapsburg emperors and swore an oath of mutual defense at Rütli. He also studied, both for *William Tell* and his 1803 poem, "The Count of Hapsburg," the 16th century *Helvetic Chronicle* of A. Tschudi.

The Forest Cantons were a stronghold of Catholicism in the period Schiller wrote, as they remain today, though Switzerland gave birth to two of the four major Protestant currents, Calvinism and Zwinglianism. Tschudi himself had been a Zwingli disciple but reconverted and became a fierce critic of the Reformation. Although a Protestant,

Schiller in his play and poem about Swiss history showed a deep and sympathetic grasp of the relation of the Swiss concept of political freedom to the Catholic faith.

He also showed his ability to probe the complexity of historic processes. The poem recounts the devotion of Rudolf of Hapsburg to the Eucharist, as the reason he merited election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1273. Yet by 1291, the high taxes and cruelty of the Hapsburg-appointed governors provoked a rebellion that culminated in the Rütli Oath and the "Tell" drama. Although the Swiss patriots detest Rudolf in Schiller's play, when Rudolf is killed and his murderer flees to William Tell, Tell rejects him and orders him to Rome: "You must away to Italy and to St. Peter's City. There cast yourself at the Pope's feet, confess to him your guilt and thus redeem your soul." It is a priest, Rösselmann, who says "let us swear the Oath of this new league" at Rütli, and who devises a subterfuge to allow citizens to avoid disobeying the arbitrary order of the governor, Gessler to bow to his hat—by placing the Host nearby. (Catholics are required to bow before the Host.)

Schiller recast the original Rütli Oath, which was still feudal in context, as a stirring appeal for the inalienable human right to freedom against tyranny. This became the motto of Lyndon LaRouche's call for "A Worldwide Anti-Bolshevik Resistance Struggle" in November 1988, on the eve of the revolutions in China and eastern Europe. —N. Hamerman

comrade in arms of Hitler' (an actual book title of 1932). Culture and prestige are always at risk from political piracy."

Not content with introducing Hitler as an, albeit confused, follower of Schiller, Reed continues:

"Though Marx is usually read as a sequel to Hegel, his much more concrete concept of alienation goes back directly to Schiller. Even where his argument seems purely economic, there are sometimes echoes of Schiller's aesthetic humanism."

And then there's Nietzsche, the intellectual author of fascism. "There are other beneficiaries yet. The young Nietzsche owes more to Schiller than he likes to admit: the fundamental human drives evoked in *The Birth of Tragedy*—the creative upthrust of the dionysian and the cool shaping power of the apolline—pose a Schillerian problem of integrating antithetical forces."

In addition, according to Reed, Freud, Jung, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Thomas Mann all find their intellectual roots in Schiller!

What message does this send to the young, enthusiastic revolutionaries of 1989? It says, simply put, that Schiller was a communist! Indeed, the East German regime claimed Schiller for its own, even as they were repressing every liber-

ty for which he gave his life.

Perhaps the real giveaway occurs not in the analytical conclusion of the book, from which we quoted above, but from Reed's lengthy description of Schiller's writings, which takes up most of the book.

As most Schiller aficionados would, I believe, agree, the highpoint of Schiller's dramatic writing occurs in his *Don Carlos*, in the scene between Posa and King Philip, where the King turns to Posa for direction, and Posa, enunciating all the ideals of the republican revolutionary, tells him to "Restore mankind's / Long-lost nobility" and that he, Posa, "cannot be the servant of a prince."

In describing the scene, Reed says, "Philip, prompt and simplistic as a McCarthy committee sniffing out Communist subversives, exclaims 'You are a Protestant.'" Posa is a communist! The revolutions against absolutism are communist! If you follow Schiller, you are following communism!

Fortunately, the revolutionaries of 1989 didn't listen to Great Britain. They broke from the real communists and embraced the real Schiller. Now the only question is, will they have the *culture* to keep the British from coming in through the side door—the door marked "free enterprise"?